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Simeon Strunsky

Genevieve Taggard

Kendall Banning

John V. A. Weaver

Edmund Wilson, Jr.

Alexander Woolcott

Ruth Hale

John Hall Wheelock

Herbert S. Gorman

Fillmore Hyde

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THE CASE OF LYDIA BIXBY

By Kendall Banning

SO widespread has grown the interest in the memorable letter that Abraham Lincoln wrote in his own hand to Lydia Bixby—perhaps better identified as “the mother of the five sons who were killed in battle”—and so firmly established in American literature has that brief but masterly bit of writing become, that the purely historical facts of the episode have all but been lost—not entirely without intent—in the passing of the years. Indeed, an inquiry started some years ago disclosed that such information as was then obtainable was largely in the hands of two or three men who were personally concerned in what later became designated as “the Bixby letter case”; apprehensive lest the circumstances surrounding it might tend to discredit the representations made to the President at the time which prompted him to indite the letter, and fearing that the misapprehensions fostered might indirectly detract from the glamour that surrounds the incident itself, they had guarded their data almost as though it were secret. No question can arise, however, that can cast the slightest reflections upon the immediate occasion from which sprang this spontaneous tribute of the foremost citizen of the republic to one of the humblest of his followers who had suffered much from the war and who was then in immediate and dire need. That Mrs. Bixby’s sacrifice was happily shown by later developments to be less than it was said to be, and perhaps believed to be at the time,

cannot dim the inspiring flash in which the letter reveals the great heart of Lincoln.

The circumstances that led to the writing of the message read almost like fiction.

On the morning of September 14, 1864, a frail little woman in faded widow’s garb walked wearily through the crowded streets of Boston. Past the gatherings of idlers who were attracted to the newspaper offices by rumors of fighting at “the front”, up the long steps of the State Capitol and by the uniformed sentries who gave a touch of color to an otherwise sombre scene, she went direct to the office of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts.

They were busy days, these, in the military offices on State House Hill. The battle of Petersburg had been won and lost, and had sent long lines of anxious, pale-faced women to besiege the government offices where the claims of the needy who had been left behind were filed. The little woman in black was in no way conspicuous in the quiet throng that filled the ante-room, nor did the purpose of her visit differ materially from that of many of the others except that she insisted upon seeing Adjutant General Schouler in person.

“I am Mrs. Bixby—Mrs. Lydia Bixby of Hopkinton,” she announced when finally she had been admitted to the sanctum of the officer in charge. “You may recall my visit of two years ago, when His Excellency kindly advanced

me forty dollars through this office to visit my son in the army hospital at Washington. I have come to apply for a pension. He is dead."

years of conflict to occasion special comment, even though the routine of the war office permitted opportunity for condolences. But seldom did two

*Executive Mansion
Washington, Nov 21, 1864*

To Mrs Bixby, Boston, Mass.

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln.

From her pocket she drew some papers and laid them on the desk before him. Two of them were envelopes of recent date, postmarked from different towns in Virginia. Both were communications from company commanders; both reported in brief, official terms the death of a son in the action before Petersburg six weeks before.

"They were the last I had," she added gently.

Messages of death had come with too great frequency during the three

such messages enter the same home on the same day. The Adjutant General regarded the woman before him with kindly interest as he made further inquiries.

In reply, she placed before him three more reports, each from an officer in the field, and each informing her of the death of a son in the military service of the Union.

"I had five," the woman stated simply.

Immune as he was to the ordinary scenes of sorrow, the Adjutant Gen-

eral paused from his labors to offer words of genuine sympathy. Then, after a hurried notation of the facts in the case and a parting word of encouragement, the woman left the room and the machinery of the department resumed its official grind.

Ten days later the Adjutant General sent the following letter to the Governor of Massachusetts:*

ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,
BOSTON, September 24, 1864.

HIS EXCELLENCY, JOHN A. ANDREW,
Governor and Commander-in-Chief.

Governor:—

Your Excellency may remember that I had the honor two years ago to speak to you of a widow lady, Mrs. Bixby, in the middle walks of life, who had five sons in the Union Army one of whom was wounded in Antietam and was sent to a hospital in Baltimore or Washington. She was very anxious to go and see him, and Your Excellency was kind enough to draw your check for Forty Dollars (\$40) to pay her expenses, and she made her journey. The boy recovered and joined his regiment again. About ten days ago Mrs. Bixby came to my office and showed me five letters from five different company commanders, and each letter informed the poor woman of the death of one of her sons. Her last remaining son was recently killed in the fight on the Weldon railroad. Mrs. Bixby is the best specimen of a true-hearted Union woman I have yet seen.

With great respect, I have the honor to be your Excellency's obedient servant,

(Signed) WM. SCHOULEB,
Adjutant General.

To this report the Governor appended the following endorsement which, with the original document, was forwarded through official channels to the Adjutant General's office at Washington:

A report to me by the Adjutant General of Massachusetts on this case, in which he mentions the case of a widow, Mrs. Bixby, who

*The correspondence that has been quoted was furnished in 1910 through the courtesy of Adjutant General Wm. H. Brigham, of Massachusetts, in whose files copies of the original letters are still kept. While these communications are authoritative and while the data on which they are based were accurate so far as the records at the time showed, a part of the correspondence was conducted, by a curious chain of circumstances that does not reflect upon the army officials concerned or detract from the spirit of Lincoln's letter, under misapprehensions.

sent five sons, all of whom have recently been killed. This is a case so remarkable that I really wish a letter might be written her by the President of the United States, taking notice of a noble mother of five dead heroes so well deserved.

In order to be assured of the accuracy of these statements the Washington office, on October first, requested a detailed report, which was furnished in the letter below, written twelve days later:

ADJUTANT GENERAL'S OFFICE,
BOSTON, October 12, 1864.

MAJOR THOMAS M. VINCENT, U. S. A.
Ass't Adjutant General,
Washington, D. C.

MAJOR:—

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 1st instant, requesting me to send you the names of the five sons of Mrs. Bixby—who were in the military service; also the regiments and companies to which they belonged. They were as follows:

1. Sergeant Charles N. Bixby, Co. D, 20th Regiment, mustered in July 28, 1862; killed at Fredericksburg, May 3, 1863.

2. Corporal Henry Bixby, Co. K, 32nd Regiment, mustered in August 5, 1862; killed at Gettysburg, July, 1863.

3. Private Edward Bixby, recruit for 22nd Regiment, Mass. Vols. Died of wounds in Hospital at Folly Island, S. C. He ran away from home and was mustered in the field.

4. Private Oliver C. Bixby, Co. E, 58th, Mass. Vols. Mustered March 4, 1864, killed before Petersburg, July 30, 1864.

5. Private George Way Bixby, Co. B, 56th Regiment, Mass. Vols. Mustered March 19, 1864. Killed before Petersburg, July 30, 1864.

The last named, George, enlisted under the assumed name of "George Way." His name was George Way Bixby. The reason why he did not enlist under his proper name was to conceal the fact of his enlistment from his wife. Very respectfully,

Your obedient servant,
(Signed) WM. SCHOULEB,
Adjutant General.

Thus fortified with evidence, the Adjutant General at Washington forwarded the correspondence to the President. Then it was that Abraham Lincoln, touched by the story of such a sacrifice, put down for a brief moment the cares of his great office and, as a fellow being, wrote a letter of condolence that the world has since come to regard as the finest message

of its kind in all English literature. He whom the country had affectionately termed "Father Abraham" reached forth his hand to comfort one of the lowliest of his children.

All too many of the heroes of the Civil War went to their graves unknown and unlamented. Bright as the records of their deeds shall shine in history, the memories of many of their lives have passed into oblivion. But in his letter to the frail little widow in a town in Massachusetts—a letter written spontaneously from a heart that overflowed with human sympathy, and that carried the ring almost of congratulation—Abraham Lincoln raised her five boys to a niche of fame that shall endure with the records of the great war in which they served. Here is his letter—written in pen and ink on the stationery of the White House:

EXECUTIVE MANSION
WASHINGTON, Nov. 21, 1864.

TO MRS. BIXBY, BOSTON, MASS.

DEAR MADAM,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle. I feel how weak and fruitless must be any word of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the republic they died to save. I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of freedom.

Yours very sincerely and respectfully,

(Signed) A. LINCOLN.

At this point the similarity to fiction ends. Two of the sons, Charles and Oliver, were actually killed in battle as originally reported. Events proved, however, that George Way Bixby was not killed before Petersburg on July 30, 1864, as at first believed. When this case was called up

in the War Department in 1893, a statement was found that he was captured on that date and that he died shortly after as a prisoner of war at Salisbury, South Carolina. A subsequent record, however, shows that one "George Way", presumably the same man, was released from the Salisbury prison, and while his official history stops at that point, it is not improbable that he eventually escaped to the Union lines and survived the war. The report of the death of Edward was later found to be erroneous—happily for his mother to whose support he contributed and with whom he was known to have lived at 74 Pleasant Street, Boston, as late as 1876. Henry Bixby, who was reported killed at Gettysburg, apparently survived that battle, where it is probable that his wounding gave rise to the report of his death. He was mustered out as "present and living" on December 19, 1864, a month after Lincoln's letter was written, and there is a record of his death at Milford on November 8, 1871, where he was buried with military honors.

These errors have been partly explained by the fact that the five sons of Lydia Bixby had four cousins of about their own age who came from the same towns of Hopkinton and Milford and who served in the same Massachusetts regiments. In the confusion that attended the large engagements of the war, it is possible that the records of these nine Bixby boys became mixed. At any rate, the two families were closely associated. "There are Bixbys in Milford today who cannot tell the difference between the two families," stated Mrs. Warren Bixby, the widow of one of the cousins and the nearest living relative of the five brothers, nearly fifty years after the war ended.

The Bixby family was not wealthy. The father, Cromwell Bixby, died at Hopkinton on December 22, 1854. Of the two sons who were killed in battle, Oliver was a machinist and Charles a trunk maker. Only nine days before her memorable visit to General Schouler, Mrs. Bixby had received an appointment as guardian of her grandson, a boy of six, who was the child of Oliver. In the absence of her soldier sons, the mother was often in exceedingly straitened circumstances. She occasionally sought employment as a nurse, and it was while working in this capacity that she died, poor and alone, in the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston on October 27, 1878.

The original Lincoln letter is now in the collection of the late J. Pierpont Morgan, in New York City. It is stated that Mrs. Bixby, in a moment of need, sold this document, which was for some time in the hands of a private collector of Lincolniana. For a long while the belief was current that

the original was at Oxford, England. For many years, also, a much worn facsimile which hung on the walls of the now defunct Huber's Museum of New York was claimed to be the original, but this was shown to be merely a lithographed reproduction, stained by coffee and exposure, that M. F. Tobin, a publisher of New York, at one time retailed at two dollars a copy, one of which he presented to Mr. Huber.

Among those who contributed information concerning the Bixby letter were Brigadier General William C. Capelle, who was a lieutenant on duty in General Schouler's office at the time of Mrs. Bixby's visit and who recalled the incident; H. J. Moulton, journalist of Boston, who has contributed the results of his investigations to the Boston "Globe"; the Hon. W. O. Stoddard, the last of the secretaries of Lincoln to survive; O. H. Oldroyd, owner of the museum maintained in the house in which Lincoln died in Washington; Truman H. Bartlett of Boston, and the late Hon. Whitelaw Reid.

JUST INTRODUCED

By Genevieve Taggard

ONLY a few hours!
We danced like wind,
Our faces like noon flowers,
On one slim stem were lifted, turned aside.
You flew, I followed, matched your stride,
And held your pause, and swung and parted wide....

Only a few hours!
We danced like wind,
Thirsty as blown flowers,
Heavy-lidded, fearful-eyed.